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The Word 'Orangutan'

Old Malay Origin or European Concoction?

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Abstract

Orangutans are a type of great ape found in the wild in Sumatra and Borneo. The word 'orangutan' in European languages originates from a Malay expression meaning 'forest person', but many scholars have argued that it was not in genuine usage among the indigenous peoples of the archipelago. Instead, it is widely believed that the word 'orangutan', as a term for the ape, resulted from either an invention or a misunderstanding on the part of European visitors in the seventeenth century CE. I argue against this view, using data from Old Javanese texts and historical-linguistic analysis to show that orangutans have been referred to by this term since the first millennium CE. My findings indicate that the modern use of the word 'orangutan' has much older roots in Malay than has been recognized previously.

Keywords

orangutan – Austronesian – Malay – Java – historical linguistics

1 Introduction

Orangutans belong to a genus of great ape (*Pongo*) and are divided into three species: the Bornean orangutan (*Pongo pygmaeus*), the Sumatran orangutan (*Pongo abelii*), and the recently identified Tapanuli orangutan (*Pongo tapanuliensis*) (Nater et al. 2017). Orangutans were once distributed widely from the Himalayan mountain range to Java, but in historical times they have only been found in the wild in Sumatra and Borneo (Rijksen and Meijaard 1999:41; Cribb, Gilbert and Tiffin 2014:15).

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In this research note, I trace the history of the word 'orangutan' in Indonesian languages. I show that it most probably originated from the Malayic expression **uraŋ hutan* ('forest person', semantically extended to 'ape of the *Pongo* genus'), and that orangutans have been called by this name for well over a thousand years. I call into question the prevailing scholarly opinion that the word 'orangutan' was first applied to the apes by European writers in the seventeenth century. The widespread occurrence of the word in contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian, in nature documentaries, in books, and online is thus the continuation of a millennium-old indigenous usage.

2 Early European Uses of the Word 'Orangutan'

The earliest published instance of the word 'orangutan' denoting a kind of ape occurs in the Dutch anatomist Nicolaes Tulp's *Observationes medicae* ('Medical observations', printed in 1641). The term seems to have been recorded slightly earlier by Jacobus Bontius (alias Jacob de Bondt, who died in 1635 in Batavia), but in that instance it may have referred to human beings (Cribb, Gilbert, and Tiffin 2014:10). From these Dutch texts, the word was borrowed into several other European languages in the seventeenth century, with a variety of spellings (Mahdi 2007:170).

Most scholars believe that Malays did not originally call orangutans 'orangutans'. This belief seems to be based on the fact that in the early nineteenth century, many Malay speakers used the general term *mawas* 'ape' to refer to the genus *Pongo*. The Melaka-born writer Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir mentioned 'two apes that were called "orang hutang" by the white people' (*dua ekor mawas yang dinamai oleh orang putih 'orang hutang'*) (Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir 1849:85). This suggests that to refer to apes as 'orangutan' was a European rather than a Malay usage. John Crawfurd reported that the application of the term 'orangutan' to non-humans was 'not known to the Malays' (Crawfurd 1850:186). He claimed that the phrase *orang tuan* attested in Kayan, a Bornean language, was an artifice to describe the ape to European visitors and was not an authentic indigenous usage.

Since Abdullah and Crawfurd, scholars have continued to argue that application of the word 'orangutan' to *Pongo* apes 'was a concoction dreamed up in the seventeenth century' (Rijksen and Meijaard 1999:62), that it is 'a designation probably originating in a European misunderstanding' (Forth 2008:150), and that 'there is no literary record [...] of the Malay-speaking peoples of the Indonesian archipelago using the term "orangutan" or one of its variants to refer to the ape before the middle of the nineteenth century' (Cribb, Gilbert,

and Tiffin 2014:12). Waruno Mahdi (2007:172) offered a rare dissenting opinion, suggesting that the European usage of 'orangutan' may have come from Banjarese, mediated by Portuguese. Nevertheless, the conventional view is that premodern Malays did not use the word to denote the ape; this is reflected by authorities such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2003:s.v. 'orangutan').

Against this prevailing view, I argue that application of the word 'orangutan' to *Pongo* apes is a genuine Malay usage of over a thousand years' standing. The semantic extension of the word 'orangutan', from forest-dwelling humans to tree-dwelling apes, occurred long before the arrival of Europeans. It was not limited to Banjarese and was certainly not a European innovation. The primary evidence for this is the word's appearance, in its older form *uraŋutan*, in several Old Javanese texts written between the ninth and the fifteenth centuries.[1]

My argument is in two parts: first, that the term *uraŋutan* in these Old Javanese texts unambiguously refers to tree-dwelling apes and not to humans who lived in forests, and second, that the term was most likely borrowed from Old Malay into Old Javanese sometime before the end of the first millennium. This implies that, at least a thousand years ago, the Old Malay expression denoted *Pongo* apes in addition to its primary meaning of 'forest person'. The Old Javanese evidence thus supports two separate claims: that the word *uraŋutan* was borrowed from Old Malay, and that the semantic extension of this word from 'forest person' to '*Pongo* ape' occurred prior to this borrowing.

3 Orangutans in Old Javanese Texts

Discussions of the etymology of the word 'orangutan' have rarely engaged with Old Javanese sources. But these sources turn out to be crucial for tracing the early history of the term. The word *uraŋutan*[2] appears in the following Old Javanese texts: the poems *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Smaradahana*, the prose text *Agastyaparva*, the ascetic code of conduct *Vratiśāsana*, the fable-cycle *Tantri Kāmandaka*, and its verse derivative *Tantri Kaḍiri*. The word often appears in lists of animals, usually collocated with other primates:

1 I romanize the phonemes of Austronesian languages according to the transcription conventions used in Blust (2013), using *ŋ* and *ñ* for the velar and palatal nasals that are usually written 'ng' and 'ny' in the region's modern languages, and *ə* for schwa. I romanize loanwords from Indo-Aryan languages according to the ISO 15919 standard for the transliteration of Indic scripts.

2 The word is sometimes spelled *wuraŋutan*, with no difference in meaning. The spelling variation of initial *u-*/*wu-* is common in Old Javanese, as shown in Zoetmulder's dictionary (1982).

anak bhagavān Pulaha i saŋ Harī ŋyaŋ lutuŋ busyat wowo uraŋutan (*Agastyaparva*)
GONDA 1933:377

'the sage Pulaha's offspring by Harī were the lutungs, monkeys, gibbons, orangutans'

talədu huwa-huwa wuraŋutan [...] *tan yogya ika bhakṣan* (*Vratiśāsana*)
RANI 1961:46

'stink badgers, gibbons, orangutans [...] must not be eaten'

mṛga taru wre lutuŋ uraŋutan uwa-uwa (*Tantri Kāmandaka*)
HOOYKAAS 1931:66

'the tree creatures: macaques, lutungs, orangutans, gibbons'

lumiñcit taŋ jəmbulan tukaŋ mwaŋ wuraŋutan amilihi pala (*Tantri Kaḍiri*)
SOEKATNO 2013:90

'the black monkeys, lemurs, and orangutans leapt about as they picked the fruit'

The *Rāmāyaṇa* describes some distinctive features of orangutans: their facial hair (*paḍa jaŋgutan wuraŋutanya manek*, 'all bearded, the orangutans climbed up') (Kern and Van der Molen 2015:574), and their swaying gait (*umilu milag log-log wuraŋutan*, 'the orangutans followed in flight, lumbering along') (Kern and Van der Molen 2015:545). The *Smaradahana* includes the stative form *awuraŋutan* ('being [like] an orangutan') to describe an army of demons: *muruŋut abhairavāmawa lipuŋ mulat awuraŋutan* ('grim like Bhairava, carrying spears, they looked like orangutans') (Poerbatjaraka 1931:41).

These Old Javanese texts were written before the sixteenth century, except for the *Tantri Kaḍiri*; see the entries for each text in Pigeaud (1967–1970). The *Smaradahana* was written during the reign of Kāmeśvara in East Java, which securely places it in the twelfth century (Zoetmulder 1974:295). The *Rāmāyaṇa* is probably the oldest of these texts, with the most credible estimates placing its completion between the 850s and the 930s (Robson 2015:26–31).[3] Robson,

3 The occurrence of *wuraŋutan* in the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been noted in passing, but it has not been

summarizing the recent scholarship on this issue, argued for 'the likelihood that the last section was added in the period 900–930' (Robson 2015:31). The *Tantri Kaḍiri*, the most recent of these texts, was composed before the end of the seventeenth century (Soekatno 2013:29–35).

There is no question that the word *uraŋutan* in these contexts refers to tree-dwelling non-humans, most likely the animals we call orangutans. This means that only the *'Pongo* ape' meaning of the term existed in Old Javanese, since human beings are never referred to as *uraŋutan* in the available sources. Moreover, it means that the semantic extension of *uraŋutan* from 'forest person' to *'Pongo* ape' had already taken place before these texts were written. This is one of several pieces of evidence that indicates that the term did not originally develop in Old Javanese but was borrowed from another language.

4 Malayic Origins of the Word 'Orangutan'

Given that the word *uraŋutan* was applied to apes in Old Javanese texts composed as early as the tenth century, the next question is: where did this usage come from? We can rule out a European coinage, given the age of the texts in which it appears. It is also unlikely that it originated among Javanese speakers. *Uraŋutan* cannot be interpreted in Old Javanese as 'forest person' or any other relevant phrase.[4] The expression for 'forest person' in this language would rather be *wwaŋ alas*, since there is no evidence of *utan* being used in Old Javanese to have the meaning 'forest'.

Moreover, sound-change rules disallow the emergence of the Old Javanese (OJ) form *uraŋutan* through direct inheritance from a hypothetical Proto-Malayo-Polynesian (PMP) root **uRaŋ qutan* 'forest person'.[5] Instead, we would

taken seriously enough as evidence for the long-term indigenous use of the term. Cribb, Gilbert, and Tiffin (2014:252) alluded to a debate regarding the suspected interpolated passages at the end of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, where the two mentions of orangutans occur. On the basis of this, the authors discounted the poem as evidence for the term's antiquity. However, the interpolation theory is no longer accepted by most specialists, since Hooykaas (1955:34–35) showed that the final sections of the poem are almost certainly an integral part of the original composition. In any case, since the mentions of orangutans appear in all complete manuscripts of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, they must have been written at an early stage of the text's history, centuries before the arrival of Europeans in the archipelago.

4 Old Javanese possesses the term *huraŋ* 'shrimp, prawn, lobster', which derives from the unrelated Proto-Austronesian root **qudaŋ*, but this cannot be plausibly connected to the meaning of *uraŋutan*.

5 Following a widespread convention in historical linguistics, I use asterisks to mark reconstructed forms in proto-languages, and double asterisks to indicate unattested forms.

expect the sequence PMP **uRaŋ qutan* > OJ **(*u*)*waŋutan*, since the PMP phoneme **R* is intervocalically deleted in OJ (Blust 2013:588). The presence of the rhotic in the attested OJ *uraŋutan* form suggests that the term was borrowed from another Malayo-Polynesian language, rather than being directly inherited by OJ from its ancestor PMP. From the examples above, it is clear that the OJ *uraŋutan* refers only to the ape and not to forest-dwelling humans.

The most probable source of this borrowing is one of the Malayic languages, which form a subgroup within the Malayo-Polynesian language family. Their reconstructed ancestor, Proto-Malayic (PM), exhibits the sound change PMP **R* > PM **r* (Adelaar 1992:86; Blust 2013:588). This rule unproblematically accounts for PM **uraŋ* 'person, stranger' (< PMP **uRaŋ*) (Adelaar 1992:139). Malayic languages also exhibit the form PM **hutan* (< PMP **qutan*) with the primary meaning of 'forest', as opposed to the meanings of 'vegetable', 'scrub', 'bush', or 'wild herbs' that are found in other Malayo-Polynesian languages (Adelaar 1992; Blust and Trussel 2013:s.v. *quCaN).

I proceed with the hypothesis that, either in Proto-Malayic itself or in some of its descendant Malayic languages, the root **uraŋ hutan* 'forest person' underwent a semantic extension to *'Pongo* ape'. This innovation seems to have been specific to the Malayic languages. Reflexes of **uraŋ hutan* are found in several members of the Malayic subgrouping, for instance Ketapang *oraŋutan*, Minangkabau and Kendayan *uraŋutan*, Banjarese *uraŋhutan*, Delang *uyaŋhutan*, and Keninjal *oɣaŋutan* (Smith 2017:616). The sound changes exhibited in these reflexes point to direct inheritance from a common ancestor, rather than any recent borrowing from modern Malay.

In contrast to their prevalence among the Malayic languages, reflexes of **uraŋ hutan* are rare in non-Malayic languages, even in places where the apes are common. A recent study of Bornean languages (Smith 2017) developed Blust's (2010) idea of a Proto-Western-Indonesian (PWI) speech community, which first migrated to Borneo and whose language is ancestral to all the Bornean languages. PWI innovated many new terms for Bornean fauna and flora, including PWI **kəRiw 'Pongo* ape', which is an entirely distinct root from **uraŋ hutan*. Reflexes of **kəRiw* appear in several language groups in Borneo: Dusunic, Paitanic, Murutic, Barito, Basap, and Kayanic (Smith 2017:382). The dominance of **kəRiw* may explain the scarcity of **uraŋ hutan* reflexes in Bornean languages.

Proto-Malayic is believed to have descended from PWI, but it either did not inherit or else lost the PWI lexeme **kəRiw* (Smith 2017:616). The semantic extension of **uraŋ hutan* from 'forest person' to include *'Pongo* ape' may thus have been innovated in Malayic languages to fulfil the role that is played by **kəRiw* reflexes in non-Malayic languages. Where **uraŋ hutan* is reflected in these non-

Malayic languages (for example, Busang, Bakumpai, Benuaq, and Tunjung), the presence of the rhotic suggests a borrowing from Malayic rather than inheritance, just as in the case of Old Javanese discussed above.

Furthermore, three non-Malayic languages seem to show calques of **uraŋ hutan*: Ba'amang *uluh hutan* (< PWI **qulun* 'person' + **qutan* 'forest') (Hudson 1967:94), Bulusu *ulun rimba?* (< PWI **qulun* 'person' + **Rimba?* 'forest') (Smith 2017:641), and Makassarese *tau romaŋ* ('person' + 'forest') (Arief 1995:352), while Kayan has the semi-calque *oraŋ tuan* (< borrowed PM **uraŋ* 'person' + PWI **qutan* 'forest') (Crawfurd 1850:186).[6] All these calqued terms refer to the *Pongo* ape. These 'Malayicisms' need not have been influenced by Banjarese specifically, as suggested by Mahdi (2007:172), since they occur in various parts of Borneo and Sulawesi.

The linguistic evidence thus suggests that reflexes of **uraŋ hutan* are especially characteristic of Malayic languages, and that they were borrowed into several non-Malayic languages in Borneo, as well as into Old Javanese. So which particular Malayic language did Old Javanese borrow the term from? Given the attestation of *uraŋutan* in the tenth-century *Rāmāyaṇa*, the most likely source of the borrowing is Old Malay. The political and cultural links between Javanese and Malays in this period are well established (Jordaan and Colless 2009). Seven Old Malay inscriptions have been found in Java, spanning the seventh to tenth centuries (Griffiths 2018:281). Old Malay is the only Malayic language known to have been used in Java during the first millennium; therefore, it is the strongest candidate for being the donor language from which *uraŋutan* was borrowed into Old Javanese.

So far I have left open the question of why the Malayic term **uraŋ hutan* underwent a semantic extension from 'forest person' to *'Pongo* ape'. Cultural anthropology suggests a possible explanation. The semantic extension may have resulted from the identification of the apes with the 'wildman' or 'hairy hominoid' cultural image attested throughout Southeast Asia (Forth 2008:3). An analogous process can be seen in the Malay term *orang pendek* (literally 'short person'), a southern Sumatran version of the wildman image that is probably based on experiences of *Pongo* apes (Rijksen and Meijaard 1999:64; Forth 2008:150). The conceptual process seems to have been as follows: real experiences of *Pongo* apes were associated with the wildman image, which then came to be referred to by a compound term comprised of **uraŋ* 'person' plus an othering qualifier, such as 'forest' or 'short'. The use of **uraŋ hutan* to refer to *Pongo*

6 Bulusu also possesses the inherited form *aguy 'Pongo* ape' (< PWI **kəRiw*) (Smith 2017:382), which suggests that the calque *ulun rimba?* may have developed with external influence. This confirms the Malayic distinctiveness of the root **uraŋ hutan*.

apes, displacing the older PWI root **kəRiw*, may thus illustrate a distinctively Malayic process whereby compound terms based on **uraŋ* came to be associated with *Pongo* apes, via the cultural image of the wildman.

5 Conclusions

In light of this literary, linguistic, and cultural evidence, we can no longer accept the 'European concoction' theory for the application of the word 'orangutan' to *Pongo* apes. These apes were referred to as *uraŋutan* in Old Javanese texts from the tenth century onwards, and so we also have to reconsider the claim that 'the animal was not known from Java in historical times' (Cribb, Gilbert, and Tiffin 2014:15). At the very least, orangutans were known in the Javanese imagination. Whether or not they were still a part of real life in Java when the *Rāmāyaṇa* poem was composed, the Old Javanese name for them was borrowed from elsewhere, most likely from Old Malay. This borrowing raises the intriguing possibility of the movement of the apes between islands, perhaps as an item of trade or gift exchange.

Since reflexes of **uraŋ hutan* existed in one or more Malayic languages during the first millennium, there is more reason to believe that the term was also known in seventeenth-century varieties of Malay. This strengthens the credibility of the earliest European reports. Nicolaes Tulp may not have been so misinformed when he claimed in 1641 that 'it is called *Orang Outang* by the Indians' (Cribb, Gilbert, and Tiffin 2014:10). Likewise, Thomas Bowrey's 1701 Malay–English dictionary may well have reflected local usage in defining 'Ōran ootan' as 'a Beast found in the Woods of Borneo' (Cribb, Gilbert, and Tiffin 2014:12). These findings show that Europeans' application of the word 'orangutan' to apes was based on an authentic Malayic expression of considerable antiquity. It was not a concoction or a misunderstanding.

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